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AUTHOR Dickinson, Sandra C.
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ABSTRACT

The corporate takeover of the Internet has moved literacy into uncharted territory. Couched in capitalist metaphors of liberation, choice, utility, and desirability, an expanded communications network that provides quick and easy access to vast amounts of information appeals to the national psyche. The commodification of literacy as a result of the current explosion in electronic consumerism is a "topos" that has received little attention in rhetoric/composition, even though computer technology has been a boon for the field in creating opportunities for theorizing and for enhancing the status of writing programs in the eyes of school administrators. Computer technology is the latest revolution in the history of writing, and never before has the implementation of a new technology depended so heavily on the integration of commercialism and education. The mixture of ads and information on the screen is confusing and distracting, especially for impressionable and easily distracted students. If K-12 students are conditioned to obtain information for research projects from commercially sponsored Web sites at home and school, this practice will continue in college. If students are to be confronted and distracted by ads in the course of learning, then the persuasion inherent in the rhetoric of advertising needs to be addressed. What is needed is a visual literacy based on Paulo Freire's critical literacy to understand and counter this commercial intrusion. This new literacy must incorporate visual rhetoric in its repertoire, for the combination of glitzy graphics promoting an array of consumer products is a compelling and entertaining combination, especially compared to the concentration and commitment required from text-bound reading and writing. (Contains 13 references.) (NKA)

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by Sandra C. Dickinson

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S. C. Dickinson

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Sandra C. Dickinson

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From its earliest origins in Sumeria, the first writing developed not as a means to preserve folklore, but as a transactional system to record the trading of agricultural produce. Writing, therefore, evolved from a basic materialistic incentive—keeping accounts and recognizing ownership and production. Richard Ohmann notes, "By coincidence—or maybe not—the term 'literacy' came into use roughly at the beginning of the epoch of monopoly capital" (677). It could be argued that the current commodification of electronic literacy reflects the advanced stage of global consumer capitalism and is, therefore, an inevitable outgrowth of literacy's practical roots.

As the Internet has attained its hegemonic status in large part because of the masterful economic revival policy of the Clinton-Gore administration, the current surge (and, I believe, crisis) in the commercialization of the Internet is inevitable because of the built-in economic incentives of this technology. The corporate takeover of the Internet has moved literacy into uncharted territory. As Jean François Lyotard observed in his report on knowledge in the postmodern era, "the computerization of society . . . could become the 'dream' instrument for controlling and regulating the market system, extended to include knowledge itself" (67). Couched in capitalist metaphors of liberation, choice, utility, and desirability, an expanded communications network that provides quick and easy access to vast amounts of information appeals to the national psyche. It seems, therefore, almost unpatriotic to critique an info/commercial partnership that has brought

unprecedented wealth to the middleclass through a booming stock market, an extended period of low unemployment, and impressive job creation.

The commodification of literacy as a result of the current explosion in electronic consumerism is a *topos* that has received little attention in rhet/comp, even though computer technology has been a boon for our field in terms of creating opportunities for theorizing and for enhancing the status of writing programs in the eyes of school administrators. We are eager to embrace computer technology in the writing classroom because doing so makes English departments visible, right up there with computer science and business courses, by keeping abreast with a rapidly changing global economy.

While we are moving writing programs into the twenty-first century, literacy is undergoing a dramatic transformation before our eyes. Computer technology is the latest revolution in the history of writing, and while each change has inevitably brought with it those pessimists who warn of the dire consequences to consciousness and epistemology engendered by a new technology, our present revolution is unprecedented, both for its speed of implementation and its global scope. And, never before in the history of literacy, has the implementation of a new technology depended so heavily on the integration of commercialism and education.

There is a growing debate among educators concerning the business model of education that has infiltrated college campuses, with the approval of administrators focused on the income stream such partnerships generate. However, I have heard very little debate about the rampant culture of consumerism on the Internet and its possible effects on literacy practices. We have generated a great deal of research on how women

and minorities interact with the Internet, and how the World Wide Web is either giving citizens of third world countries a voice or silencing them, but what about the oppressive and impressive presence of the virtual shopping mall?

I am particularly interested in how the marriage between literacy and advertising is faring and the probable long-term consequences of this relationship. I know from my own experiences on the Internet that my reading habits are in disarray; the mixture of ads and info on the screen is confusing, illogical, and distracting. Imagine what this arrangement (or lack of it) is doing to impressionable and easily distracted students. And advertisers happily capitalize on this pathway to the consciousness of up and coming consumers thanks to the willingness of educators and administrators to court corporate sponsorship.

According to Alex Molnar of the Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education, "Today, in schools all over America students are routinely required to view advertising in order to complete class assignments or are denied access to learning technologies unless they provide marketers information about themselves and their families" (2). Molnar explores the marketing practices of the ZapMe! Corporation "which provides computer labs and Internet access to K-12 schools in return for advertising or promotional access to students and their families." Because parents want schools to teach their children the latest in computer literacy, the sponsorship of corporations such as ZapMe! is the only viable means of providing this training in an era of budgetary restraints.

If K-12 students are conditioned to obtain information for research projects from commercially sponsored web sites at home and school, this practice will continue in

college. On the surface it may appear to be a benign relationship--students have free access to vast quantities of information, all made possible by corporate enterprises that pay the costs in exchange for advertising space. Schools can now fulfil their mandate to prepare students for entry into the computerized workplace with the help of corporations who only ask for advertising time in exchange for the use of computer hardware and software. No harm done, right?

Nearly forty years ago Marshall McLuhan expressed concern at the explosion of ads on TV "designed by the Madison Avenue frogmen-of-the-mind." He asked: "Would it not seem natural and necessary that the young be provided with at least as much training of perception in this graphic and photographic world as they get in the typographic? In fact, they need more training in graphics, because the art of casting and arranging actors in ads is both complex and forcefully insidious" (229-30). As visual rhetoric now matches and frequently surpasses the power of textual rhetoric in electronic forums, students must have training in both visual and textual rhetoric.

Images vie for space and attention on Web pages, and if students are to be confronted and distracted by ads in the course of learning, then the persuasion inherent in the rhetoric of advertising needs to be addressed. But, how is that possible when this amounts to biting the hand that feeds them? Corporate underwriting cannot be regarded as merely a convenient and necessary evil to make Internet access affordable in schools, for in reality this is a smokescreen for extending markets to an increasingly interesting and exploitable segment of the market for advertisers—students. But, this is the nature and method of advanced capitalism. The relentless search for new markets means that

the next generation of consumers must be tapped early, before they are aware of the nature of the beast.

What we really need is a visual literacy based on the concepts of Paulo Freire's critical literacy in order to understand and counter this commercial intrusion that Jonathan Kozol calls the "management of public consciousness" (94). Clifford Stoll, who is something of a maverick in computer science because he addresses issues that typically concern humanists, remarks, "It's impossible to browse the Web without swimming a river of flashing advertisements. Corporations have found the ideal electronic entry into the classroom: The perfect way to target kids for cereals, candy bars, and clothes" (8). Freire's critical literacy has been instrumental in enabling the disenfranchised and the illiterate to claim agency and disrupt the political and economic hegemony that has silenced them. The corporate hegemony of the Internet must be similarly countered if the Internet is to live up to the promises claimed for it as the great global democratizer.

Because the advance of consumer capitalism is heavily dependent upon the success of advertising campaigns to stimulate consumer spending we tend to tolerate the discourse of advertising as the cost of doing business. Ellen Barton characterizes the discourse on technology as falling into two camps: the dominant discourse lauds its intersections with culture, literacy, and education while the antidominant is skeptical about technology's role in culture and education. She contends that much current scholarship in literacy and composition is subsumed by the dominant discourse. We need to revitalize the antidominant forces in rhet/comp; we need to develop a rigorous critique of the consumer culture that is sweeping through education and into composition classes.

A typical response to the antidominant camp is expressed by Kathleen Tyner, author of *Literacy in a Digital World: Teaching and Learning in the Age of Information*. She believes that "intellectual debates about the ideological nature of media as hegemonic instruments have never been particularly salient to the practical concerns of teachers" (116). Yet Tyner insists that K-12 teachers are doing a fine job of teaching critical literacy to their students.

The leading edge of inventiveness and creativity in computer technology is in image production and, as a result, an interest in visual literacy is becoming apparent in our field, as several presentations at this conference demonstrate. Many of the new composition textbooks on the market, and new editions of current offerings, have included a chapter on visual literacy to supplement textual rhetorical theory. A comprehensive vocabulary of terms for analyzing visual literacy is available for use in composition classrooms. For instance, Susan Hilligoss in *Visual Communication: A Writer's Guide*, points out that our interpretation of visuals is guided by the precepts of the German twentieth-century perceptual school known as Gestalt. Graphics are designed with keen attention being paid to research that demonstrates the effectiveness and power to influence the emotions of such elements as colors, and the optimum arrangement of graphic designs to work in tandem with natural eye movements. Hilligoss draws on a variety of illuminating research that shows that the eye tends to focus on illustrations before text, that images are easier to remember than text, and that learning that emphasizes analytical reasoning is different cognitively from learning through exposure to visual means.

Advertisers on the Internet have not only incorporated this very same research into their designs, but will also have carefully studied and experimented with how best to reach and manipulate the consciousness of the audience. As a self-described itinerant teacher who collaborates globally with K-12 instructors to bring new technologies in the classroom, Tyner feels that "commenting on the significance of color and composition is an interesting parlor game, but its usefulness for literacy and language learning is questionable" (109). Students, thus, are deprived of critical criteria for evaluating the motives behind the visual and textual advertising messages they are bombarded with as they surf the Net seeking information for school assignments.

We may like to believe that we can simply ignore all those pulsating, intriguing logos that squeeze the text to a narrowing ribbon in the center of the page. However, Christina Haas reminds us, in the context of using computer technology, that "what is ubiquitous becomes transparent" (xi). In the absence of a critical appraisal it is all too easy to look *through* and not *at* technology. Similarly, with advertising on the Internet, we can imagine that we can disregard it as just so much noise to be tuned out.

While it is a promising sign that composition textbooks are beginning to draw students' attention to the design features of visuals, both in their reading and in their construction of documents, the social impact on literacy practices of consumerism is typically not addressed. McLuhan felt that ads "are quite in accord with the procedures of brainwashing. This depth principle of onslaught on the unconscious may be the reason why" (227). Perhaps this would be a good place from which to launch a theory of critical visual literacy.

By drawing upon the theories of consciousness developed by cultural/linguistic/social theorists such as Lev Vygotsky and V.N. Volosinov, we can develop a vocabulary of terms and theories applicable to an expanded notion of literacy studies. Vygotsky maintains that speech is a social activity that develops through the interactions between a child and his/her caregiver. If a child's inner speech develops through external stimuli, then obviously the social practices that surround literacy have psychological consequences. Developing an understanding of the concept of consciousness is crucial for accessing and appreciating the multiplicity of effects attributed to the variety of literacies we encounter. As we interpret and interrogate the world through our accumulated experiences, we construct our internal version of reality through the infiltration and absorption of these encounters.

This two way interaction is utterly dependent upon signs, for as Volosinov says, "Consciousness becomes consciousness only once it has been filled with ideological (semiotic) content, consequently, only in the process of social interaction . . . If we deprive consciousness of its semiotic, ideological content, it would have absolutely nothing left. Consciousness can harbor only in the image, the word, the meaningful gesture" (11-13). Our constant bombardment by alluring, stimulating ads most definitely does have consequences. As the field of literacy studies has a long history of research into the effects of words on our consciousness, we have a large body of knowledge from which to draw.

The ideological nature of images has been thoroughly exposed and explored by Roland Barthes. He states that "Since every sign supposes a code, it is this code (of connotation) that one should try to establish" (19). The connotative message, Barthes

tells us, is not immediately apparent and must be teased out. Images are not neutra their interpretation is historical, ideological, and cultural. Freire has shown how these same factors are imbricated in language, and until pulled apart and deconstructed, continue to be harnessed by hegemonic forces, with devastating consequences for the marginalized. Similarly, if we adopt a critical literacy to counter the clever, intriguing visuals that compete for our attention when surfing the Web, we will be training our students to be alert to the seduction of web sites that offer information in grid-like page layouts that replicate department store aisles.

The advertising/information mix is also changing reading conventions through the convoluted page layouts this partnership necessitates. There is a limit, however, to how much one can comfortably display on the average size computer screen, but competition for precious space has caused the conventions of display, arrangement and acceptability to go by the wayside. To dotcoms, white space is unrealized profit potential unless pressed into service through advertising spots. We teach our technical and business writing students that the careful utilization of white space guides the reader to important information, renders order on the page, and minimizes confusion and disorientation--all ethical concerns. The mantra now seems to be that white space is wasted space.

The placement of the most compelling, attention-grabbing ads at the top of the page, often the left-hand corner, harnesses our Western-conditioned reading conventions for profit. Resisting the lure of the visual is next to impossible for the visual world is our natural environment; our attraction to images, especially those that whirl and rotate imitates our own constant motion. If our eyes naturally search out images first, and if a dizzying variety of images vie for our attention, then static, black-and-white text is at a

disadvantage, especially for children whose attention span is short. The relationship between center and margins has been turned on its head, for the narrow strip of text squeezed into the center of the page no longer dominates the page. What theory do we have to explain the relationship (or should we say lack of relationship) between text and ads? Neither the theories of complementarity or compensation are relevant here.

When we begin to analyze the logic of a web page, we realize that we cannot avoid discussing power relationships. Freirean intervention can alert students to how conformity with corporate ideals diminishes their individuality and their agency. As literacy teachers we no longer have the luxury of limiting our expertise to textual analysis. The new literacy must of necessity incorporate visual rhetoric in its repertoire for the combination of glitzy graphics promoting an enticing array of consumer products is a compelling and entertaining combination, especially when compared to the concentration and commitment required from text-bound reading and writing.

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